

Columbia State 4: Expanding Horizons:

By: IndigoRho

“Oh, the hookah club.” Marcus looked up at the small neon sign of the building, a rough representation of a mountain and sunset that likely appeared less than impressive during the day. “Horizons” was spelled out in glowing orange below.

“Uh, yeah, you haven't been here yet, right?” Niall responded. Despite the sun being down, the goat merely wore shorts and a slightly loose t-shirt, his considerable bulk keeping him warm. “I told you where we were going before we left, why do you sound so surprised?”

Marcus put his hands back in his sweatshirt pockets, resting them on his reasonably plump belly. The zebra wished he'd hidden his confusion better. “Actually, you just said you were taking me to the 'club', so I assumed it would be something, well, vore-related.”

“Ha!” Niall laughed. “That's ridiculous, Riley said I wasn't allowed. Really persistent about it, too. Which blows, since Apex is amazing this time of the year. No college freshmen newbie preds stinking up the place. Literally.”

Marcus gave a half-hearted laugh of his own. He had only known Niall for a couple months, and the ravenous goat's passion for vore was difficult to get used to. “I'm bummed Riley and Eli both had work tonight.”

“Not as bummed as Eli is. Dude didn't even try to crack a dumb joke when I called him up earlier, just sounded exhausted. Maybe he tripped over a stretcher last night or something,” Niall said, not really remembering exactly what Eli did at work. “Well, whatever, you just get to have some quality bro time with me.” He pushed through the club's doors, quickly followed by Marcus.

The inside of Horizons was somehow darker than the cloudy night outside. Most of the ceiling fixtures were dimmed excessively, while a line of product-related neon signs gave passable light to the bar/concession stand. Massive pane glass windows stretched the length of two walls, letting in the light of streetlamps and giving patrons a unique view of the intersection. Marcus thought the main room's layout a bit arbitrary. There wasn't a main pathway from the entrance, and the pair had to weave their way past the numerous hookahs, all surrounded by a peculiar array of couches, chairs, and beanbags. Even in the dark they seemed exceptionally worn, as if each had been nabbed from street-sides or thrift stores.

“Man, I remember when this place was just this room here,” Niall said. “They only had hookah then, though. Now they've got spots for pot and inflation, plus a few private rooms.”

“They do inflation here?” Marcus asked, looking around the room. Inflation was niche enough to still mostly be considered a private endeavor, though it was gaining notoriety as a potential, natural way to quit vore. The claim rested on the belief that vore was sometimes driven by a desire to feel full, so the obvious solution was to fill yourself completely with something besides a living being. A lot of predators swore by it, but official studies showed wildly inconsistent results.

“Yeah, it's pretty much the only reason Victor works here. Loves it more than pot, and that dude pretty much used to sleep with a bong,” Niall said. “You can hear him gush about it if you want, looks like he's manning the desk now.”

The check-in desk was a bit better lit than the rest of the club. A tan and orange scaled lizard was flipping through some papers, stopping occasionally to check his computer. He wore a solid black shirt with “Horizons” written across it in large lettering that glowed faintly. A bulletin board on the wall behind him was covered in notices and an odd blob of photos in one corner.

“Yo, Victor!” Niall bellowed as they approached, startling the lizard.

Victor looked away from his work, grinning once he recognized the voice's source. “Niall! Thanks for dropping by. I expected you to be a bit bigger by now.”

“Oh shut it, we hung out two days ago,” Niall responded.

“I'm joking, I'm joking,” Victor laughed. “But why don't you have a snack to tide you over till

your main course there,” he said, motioning towards Marcus. Victor pulled out a candy bar from behind his desk, tossing it to Niall without waiting for an answer.

Niall wasted little time downing the bar. “He isn't dinner, you know he's not my type. Besides, he's off limits.” Marcus remained quiet, unsure if any part of the conversation was sarcastic. “And *I'm* surprised you had anything left back there. Haven't seen you this fat in years.”

“Hey, it's not my fault! I go home, relax, get a bit of the munchies, and then Adam cooks for four but barely eats for one.” Victor gave his soft belly a little prod. “It'd be irresponsible to let those leftovers go to waste.”

“Such a sacrifice.” Niall rolled his eyes. “Oh. Marcus, Victor. Victor, Marcus,” he introduced the pair bluntly. “Marcus, you two should hang out together, I'm sure Riley would appreciate the help with your waistline.”

Marcus looked away, unconsciously trying to adjust his obviously too-small sweatshirt.

Victor noticed the zebra's embarrassment. “Hey, don't worry, I've been friends with Riley long enough to know his preferences. And, just between you and me, he gets adorably bubbly when he talks about you.”

Marcus remained embarrassed, but for entirely different reasons.

“You're all ridiculous,” Niall interrupted. He looked around for a moment. “Is Adam working tonight?”

“Uh, no,” Victor answered with dismay. “He's, uh. He's at home digesting a meal.”

Niall abruptly became serious. “What? Was he attacked again? Is he ok?”

“I don't really know to be honest.” Victor seemed to regret bringing it up. “He came home late last night and wouldn't tell me anything. I mean, it looked like he fought someone, but he kept trying to pretend nothing had happened. I wish he'd just let me know what's going on.”

“The 'will they or won't they' thing you and Adam have going on is absurd,” Niall said with a hint of frustration. “Just make out already so I stop losing hot chicks to ya.”

Victor's mood perked a little. “That happened once, and our preferences in women are completely different.”

“It's happened way more than once!” Niall insisted. “I fill myself with a sleazy jerk, they call me insensitive. He fills himself with air, they say he's being quirky.”

“I really don't think me dating Adam will solve *your* problem, Niall.” Victor sighed. “And things are complicated. I mean, the last few months have been real rough on both of us.” He glanced over his shoulder at one of the many photos tacked on the wall. A lizard, a raven, and a badger were smiling widely back, posing in the club with their staff shirts on.

“Yeah, sorry.” Niall saw the picture, too. “Jamie and Adam being attacked on the same day was...well. At least Adam was able to turn the tables on his pred.”

Victor turned away from the photos. “I should've been with Jamie, we always rode the bus home together from work, but...I couldn't say no to getting dinner with Adam. I was so sure it might be the start of something, finally.”

“Don't blame yourself,” Niall said sternly. “Trust me, it's not worth it. For all you know you'd have been eaten along with him.”

“You're right, thanks. You and Adam have really helped me get through this. I...I don't know if I'd been able to handle him being eaten, too. Moving in to replace Jamie was very kind of him.”

“Well, one day I'll find the pred who ate Jamie, and then there'll be one less problem in the city.” Niall shook his gut for emphasis.

Marcus had done his best to remain invisible during the conversation. He didn't really know anything about Victor, Adam, or Jamie, or what they'd been through, and just being nearby felt like intruding. Niall finally noticed just how uncomfortable the zebra looked, and decided to shift away from personal matters as best he could.

“Alright, depressing ourselves won't solve anything. Victor, I brought Marcus here so you could

give him a little sample of inflation.”

Victor tried to put back on a smile. “He hasn't tried before?”

“Never,” Niall replied. “And you claimed inflating could help increase stomach capacity, or something. I'm sure Marcus would appreciate that.”

“When did I say that?” Victor asked.

“I don't know, Riley said you did.”

“Was I high at the time?”

Niall shrugged. “Whatever, it really doesn't matter.”

“So, what would you like to try today?” Victor asked Marcus.

Marcus was confused. He hadn't expected to be inflating that night. “Uh, I'm not sure. I don't really know much about inflation to be honest. What do you recommend?”

Victor's eyes lit up in excitement. “Supervising a first timer is always so fun! There's an activity room open that'll work perfectly, lots of space and privacy.” He stepped towards a doorway behind him. “Hey Brooke, I've got a session to watch! Look after the desk for me, alright!”

After some bit of confirmation he returned his attention to Niall and Marcus. “So what are your sizes?”

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Marcus stepped out of the small changing booth cautiously. Despite wearing a full body suit he felt rather exposed, increasingly regretful about choosing the zebra stripe pattern. He looked, well, naked. No wonder Victor had giggled when he made the choice. And again as he walked out.

“Going with the matching pattern was bold,” Victor said with a smile. “I'll make sure to send some pics to Riley, I'm sure he'd appreciate them.”

Niall stood besides him, his own outfit a dark black color. “It's like having Riley-vision,” he joked, pantomiming binoculars.

Marcus blushed at the attention, trying to think of a comeback. “Well, uh, you look kind of goofy in that wetsuit, too, Niall. Black's not *that* slimming.”

The other two smiled at his attempt, and he got over his embarrassment enough to rejoin them. Walking over the padded floor was odd; it reminded him of the gym mats from high school. Padding also covered the walls and ceiling, providing ample protection. The room was rather sparse considering its size, empty aside from the changing booths and some unfamiliar equipment against a wall.

“So, where do we begin?” Marcus asked.

Victor's grin somehow grew. “Seeing as it's your first time, we're gonna keep things simple.” Marcus seemed relieved. “Full body inflation with ordinary air.”

Marcus' concern returned. “Full body inflation?”

“Yep! Becoming a giant ball feels incredible, and makes smaller inflation feel a lot more comfortable in the long run.”

“Isn't there a chance I might pop?”

Victor remained positive. “Oh of course not. Probably. The level of inflation involved is well within safety guidelines, and the room's clear of most objects that could actually cause a puncture.”

“O...ok.” Marcus wasn't entirely convinced.

“Don't worry, Marcus, I'm *very* experienced with inflation. I wouldn't put you in danger. Now let's head over to the hoses.”

Victor guided Marcus to a small, unpadded portion of the wall. A handful of hoses and tubes were hanging, neatly coiled, with small touchscreens in between them. Victor carefully unraveled the closest, a clear thin tube that barely looked thicker than a straw.

“I need you to swallow this until the end's entered your stomach. That'll ensure it doesn't come out during the actual inflation, and is just easier in general on a first-timer like yourself.”

Marcus accepted the tube and complied, awkwardly swallowing it down slowly. The plastic

taste wasn't unbearable, but far from enjoyable. For a moment he wondered if vore felt at all similar. He shrugged off the idea, recalling just how euphoric most predators appeared while swallowing their prey. Either way, he didn't feel like dwelling on it any longer.

Victor eventually gripped the tube again, holding it in place. "Alright, that should be more than enough. Now, back up about ten feet more just to give yourself some space, and I'll get things started."

Marcus' attempt at a response was garbled and unintelligible. He quickly resorted to a simple thumbs up.

Victor poked his way through the rough touchscreen's menus, trying his best to avoid scratching it any further in the process with his claws. He entered Marcus' height and weight, selected a safe goal volume, and grabbed the station's small wireless controller for later use before returning to Marcus.

"Ok, I'm gonna start you off slow to ease you into the expansion. You shouldn't feel any pain, but it will definitely feel odd. If at any time you want me to stop the inflation early, just give me a thumbs down, ok?" Marcus nodded in response. "Good, now are you ready to get big?"

Victor clicked the small remote in his hand, and a slight hissing noise began echoing its way down the tube. The sudden flow of air in his stomach startled Marcus momentarily. He placed his hands on his belly, already feeling it begin to tighten and stretch, but he didn't notice any visible change. As if on cue, his belly abruptly began to swell. Marcus simply stared, mesmerized, as he steadily grew in size. There wasn't any pain, like Victor had promised, and he couldn't think of a good way to describe what he was experiencing. He had expected to feel incredibly full, or at least some sense of pressure, but neither were accurate. Perhaps that would change once he was bigger.

Niall watched Marcus' inflation from a distance, planning his own amusement for the night. "Hey, Victor, I'm gonna grab a drink real quick! Throat's a bit dry."

Victor was busy watching over Marcus, back turned to Niall, and barely gave the goat notice. "You're free to have the soda I brought with me, it's by the changing rooms."

"Uh, thanks." Niall mumbled a bit under his breath.

Niall really just wanted an excuse to sneak away from Victor to grab dinner, and wasn't about to be foiled by the lizard's donation. He spotted the bright green bottle easily, wandering over to grab it. Twisting off the cap, he chugged the soda as quickly as he could manage.

"Victor, the soda was great and all, but I'm just thirsty as hell right now," Niall shouted, belching loudly afterward. "I really need to get another, shouldn't be gone long!"

Victor seemed to be ignoring him now.

The goat smiled, victorious, then belched unexpectedly a second time. Then a third. "Woah, how carbonated was that thing." Niall's voice went up in pitch towards the end. Confused, he bleated a couple times to confirm he wasn't imagining things. Each sounded squeakier than the last. Only then did he bother to look down and notice his four hundred pound body somehow swelling. He turned back towards Victor, furious.

"Victor you bastard, what did you do to me!" He yelled in a high pitched voice that couldn't have sounded any less threatening.

"One of your biggest flaws, Niall, is that you never *really* pay too much attention to what you eat, living or otherwise." Victor said. "The soda you drank and the candy bar you scarfed down earlier are some of our more popular inflation products."

Niall began stomping towards Victor, still plagued by the occasional belch.

"When they're combined, they create a gas that's fairly similar to helium. You're supposed to consume small bits of each for a fun partial inflation. Of course, you can also just down both all at once to get the full body experience." Victor gave Marcus a devious grin.

Marcus had a clear view of the unfolding prank. Niall's belly had become comically big, slowing his movement to an angry waddle. His inflation seemed to be progressing swiftly, too.

"Helium inflation's fun, though, so I can't really blame you for going all out on it. Unfortunately, you'll have a hard time eating customers while stuck on the ceiling." Victor winked at

Marcus, who managed a short laugh despite the tube.

"What? I wasn't going to eat anyone, I swear!" Niall lied, horribly. He was fairly spherical now and hardly able to walk at all. His next step touched the ground for only a moment, before he found himself floating upwards, slowly. Flailing as wildly as he could manage did little to help.

"On the way in you were eyeballing one of our regulars, a wolf who I'm under the impression has never eaten anyone in his life." Victor finally bothered turning around, amused by his handiwork. He was a firm believer that inflation should be consensual, but his friend needed to be kept in check. "Horizons needs to be a safe place, Niall. And I made a promise to Adam."

Marcus' gaze followed Niall as he rose to the ceiling, fully rounding out on the journey. When his back finally bumped up against the padding, only his head, hands, and feet were left poking out from his inflated body. In general, he looked grumpy and defeated. Niall didn't bother arguing with Victor further, mainly from embarrassment of his temporarily goofy voice. The humorous ordeal had thoroughly distracted Marcus, who suddenly became aware of his own progress. Marcus was now ball-shaped himself, about as large as Niall had been before he took flight.

"Alright, this should be a good size for now," Victor said, clicking his remote again. "We want you to be able to move at least a little on your own, unlike Niall up there." The faint hissing noise ceased, and he carefully began pulling the tube out of Marcus, who twitched a bit as it moved back up his throat.

"So, how do you feel?" Victor asked eagerly.

"It's kind of hard to describe, honestly." Marcus answered. "I feel so big, but really light at the same time. I do feel sort of full, but not in a painful or a sluggish way, just a, I don't know, technical way?"

Victor laughed. "That sounds pretty accurate to me. You should try moving around a bit."

Marcus attempted to step forwards, and quickly discovered he had to practically shift his entire body to succeed. He may not have felt heavy, but he did feel awkward. "This is going to take some getting used to," he laughed a little himself.

"At least you can still move!" Niall squeaked from above.

Victor was happy Marcus seemed to be having fun. "Yeah, it'll get a bit easier with practice."

"Woah, oh!" Marcus lost his balance and fell forward, sliding onto his stomach. He rolled back and forth attempting to get up, though he quickly realized it was an impossible task.

"And that's one of the many reasons you always have someone supervise inflation," Victor said, gently rolling Marcus over onto his back.

"Thanks," Marcus said, a little embarrassed by the fall.

Victor smiled. "No problem. Now let's have a little fun." He began slowly rolling Marcus around the room, doing his best to make the experience as comfortable as possible.

"I do hope you're enjoying yourself," Victor told Marcus. "I absolutely adore inflation, and love introducing others to it."

"It's definitely a lot more interesting than I had expected," Marcus admitted. "I guess I thought I'd feel a lot less safe, too."

"People tend to assume that your body becomes as frail as a balloon when you inflate, or that the slightest scratch will pop you." Victor sighed. "It's incredibly safe as long as you're careful, and can genuinely help people. I'd probably still be a pred if I hadn't embraced inflation."

Marcus was curious. "You used to hunt?"

"Yeah, and often, unfortunately." Victor became somber. "Niall got me into vore when we were younger."

"I miss the hunts, Victor," Niall chimed in from a distance. "Going solo isn't nearly as fun, and Eli's brothers are a poor replacement for you."

Victor's expression revealed he obviously disagreed. "You'll just have to endure without me. I should have stopped hunting a lot earlier, probably after we...well, never mind," Victor said. "Besides, I

shed so much weight when I quit. I used to be fatter than you are!”

“You were fatter because you were always too damn lazy to hit the gym with me in the off-months!” Niall shouted. “A smart pred hunts for a few months, then breaks for a while to lose the excess weight!”

“I only avoided that because I hoped I’d be too reluctant to eat people if the gain would put me over the edge,” Victor countered.

“Whatever,” Niall moved on. “Ooh, I’ve got an idea. Marcus, I should take you on a hunt or two. If we found the perfect prey you could put on a ridiculous amount of weight in no time for Riley.”

Victor seemed annoyed. “Niall, don’t try pushing vore as a solution to people’s problems.”

“I think I’ll be fine gaining the normal way,” Marcus spoke up. “I really don’t think I’d be able to handle eating another person.”

“Just think about it, it’d be a huge screw you to nature,” Niall insisted. “We could find you a really fat lion to eat or something, it’d be awesome!”

For a moment, Marcus contemplated the offer. A meal that large could save him months of gaining, ease Riley’s concerns that much sooner. But would he actually be able to live with the consequences afterward?

Victor saw the doubt in Marcus’ eyes. “Don’t pay any attention to him, Marcus. Niall makes it seem so easy, but trust me, it’s not.”

Marcus nodded in return.

“Ok, enough of that,” Victor said, grinning again. “I think now’s the perfect time for a few souvenir pictures!”

He carefully rolled Marcus back onto his feet and took out his phone. Stepping away, Victor snapped a few quick pictures of the smiling, incredibly inflated Marcus. He immediately sent one off to Riley with the text *pretty sure you can’t eat him anymore*. Victor then turned his attention to the helpless Niall, taking a barrage of pictures from various angles and distances.

Niall’s struggles renewed. “C’mon man, that’s not fair!” he whined.

“They’re for a good cause, Niall. I’m sure Eli and Adam will appreciate them.” He quickly sent a few of the best to the pair. To Adam he added the text *dealt with our problem, no missing customers tonight*. Surprisingly, Riley had already sent him a response: a single, blushing feline emoticon. Victor smiled.

“Marcus, Riley seems to be enjoying your new shape. Hopefully he doesn’t change your weight gain goals to match!” Victor joked.

Marcus appeared either too embarrassed or too flattered to respond.

“You’ll have to come again with Riley sometime,” Victor said. “Group sessions are the best. There are a lot of things you can do with friends while inflated, and even more with boyfriends.” He gave Marcus’ belly a playful slap.

Marcus remained at a loss for words. A date night at Horizons would definitely be interesting, to say the least. Victor’s earlier joke lingered in his mind, though. Riley and Marcus had never decided on a definite, perfect end weight for the zebra. Once they were content he’d be too difficult to accidentally eat, would he honestly stop gaining? He had become increasingly fond of the experience, much to his own surprise, and hadn’t really spent much time envisioning the end weight *he* would prefer. Niall seemed to manage being four hundred pounds fairly well, and he wasn’t even close to his usual peak. Marcus considered the joy Riley would get if he ever got that big. Or bigger. Fortunately, he was still months away from having to make a decision. Marcus would just have to wait and see.